

Opposing War: What Shall Be Done?

Reportback

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I wasn't going to write anything, I went to listen and learn. "Opposing War. What should be done?" was an online public meeting organised by the Anarchist Communist Group [ACG], with talks by members of the Old Moles Collective, and a variety of fellow anti-war organisers and anti-militarist activists, and comrades in the class war. So, despite our mutual ire over the issue of trans solidarity, I shelved one issue of critical concern and went along to hear the opposing perspective on another. I was keen to hear their positions. The session was attended by around 30 others this number included several members of the aforementioned groups but also a handful of folk from groups such as CWO and ACN, alongside a few individuals I recognise as fellow anarchist commentators and organisers.

The talk was billed with the questions:

"... How do we increase the audience for an internationalist position that opposes imperialist war? How do we give practical solidarity to those directly effected by war, to the war resisters, conscientious objectors, draft dodgers and deserters who have risked much, whether in Russia, Ukraine or Israel? How do we sabotage the war efforts? ..."

I won't dilly dally, These questions and more were left entirely unanswered and they were left to the vague prospect of re-unionism, that being a constant drive to address matters at the next meeting or event in the future. Instead what we had, after the usual zoom based tech issues, accidental persec fuck-ups, and a fair amount of "hello, can you hear me....." was a series of four short talks, mostly discussing the "correct view" on these matters and some discussion about this.

I hope I fairly summarise these talks and forgive me if I get anything wrong or if I misheard, misunderstood anything.

The first speaker was **D of ACG**. Despite the light horizontal attack at anarchists who support those resisting occupation, ethnic cleansing and genocide within the opening statements, D went on to give a pretty interesting, albeit condensed, summation of historical trade union action during war time. This included a healthy account of anti-militarism and the anarchist positions of those who came before us. He specifically leant on the Marxist John Maclean, whose opposition to The Great War was one of the most vocal and who fought tirelessly for raising up the class consciousness of the working class.

He then went on to talk about how mass workers action may seem impossible but that it is the only vector towards our shared revolutionary purpose before declaring that “we” must stand against “humanitarian positions” choosing “sides” rather than class. Returning to the adage “we must resist capitalist war and capitalist peace”.

He rounded his section off with the first of four John Maclean quotes across the various talks, with a restatement that we are “Internationalists First, Last, and All the Time”.

Alex Alder was second to go but was having tech issues, however he was able to give his talk before the end of the session, so for the flow of this piece I’ll sum it up here. His points seemed four fold, firstly that We do have ideas on how to encourage our position, but we need to do so outside the capitalist systems. He did not go into what these methods were. Secondly he gave a strong commentary on the role Britain plays in global arms production and trading, although time limited to be brief, this alone could fill a talk I’m sure but not here. (*The sheer numbers at play here are staggering and terrifying and something we all should consider.*) Thirdly, that it’s important to oppose strong ideas of what he termed as “liberal militarism” and finally he spoke at some length about how patriarchy is part of the social issue of war and that organised resistance should be feminist in nature.

I had wanted to ask Alex Alder how he feels about the bad jacketing / fash jacketing of anarchists in Ukraine/Palestine etc but ultimately with the tech issues and the heated manner of some of the discussion section I felt it best to stay shtum. This is something I have genuine interest in knowing and if you read this, please email us and let me know.

P of Old Moles Collective was next, self describing the group as not “political persay” but mostly composed of Left Communists. He opened up with with the position Internationalism has become a dividing line between genuine revolutionaries and those who argue for national defence. Stating that many radical groups have been exposed as ”defencist”, (It’s a Marxist insult, if one of them calls you it, pretend to be devastated) by supplying money and materials to war fighters in Ukraine (...Palestine and so on presumably). He remarked (quite correctly) that in these wars it is the working class who suffer, and that patriotism is a weapon the capitalist class used to manipulate the working classing into fighting and dying. However he then declared revolutionary defeatism the only way forward for the internationalist movement.

*While none of the speakers stopped to explain “revolutionary defeatism”, it being presumed knowledge, I should add for context that it is a primarily Marxist concept forwarded by Lenin and others during The Great War that takes the view that during a Capitalist/Reactionary war between two opposing empires, the working class are better served by attacking their own government and it’s capacity to wage war on others. Further that the we should focus on bringing the war home and making it a civil war/class struggle for international revolution. Its adherents position this “internationalism” as the singular correct view point and generally expand it to encompass all wars, including those which are defensive in nature or resisting occupation and genocide, this being reduced to “nationalist struggles” or “wars of national liberation”. **It is not my Internationalism**, I believe in solidarity amongst the oppressed peoples of this world.*

P would then explain that currently the international left is at a weak point and that we can have little effect on these grand events and it’s our task to follow these events and offer the correct analysis and commentary. He then spoke about how the capitalist class aim to control the working class before giving us a Lenin quote I didn’t quite get but seemed to be along the lines of “In times of war, any class action is treason”, I’m sorry I don’t know my Lenin very well, Fuck Lenin.

He wrapped his section up with a quote taken from the Emma Goldman piece “The Promoters of the War Mania” written in 1917: *“I for one will speak against war so long as my voice will last, now and during war. A thousand times rather would I die calling to the people of America to refuse to be obedient, to refuse military service, to refuse to murder their brothers, than I should ever give my voice in justification of war, except the one war of all the peoples against their despots and exploiters—the Social Revolution.”*

Our next speaker was **Candy**, an Anarchist who has been involved in actions against weapons factories used against Palestinian civilians. Her main focus was the colonialist war that Israel has been waging, highlighting that this is not a conflict between two equals, nor is it a simple war of religion or nationality. *“No War But The Class War is my ideal position but at the same time, I couldn’t just go on a demo and that’s that. I had to do more.”* That something more was taking part in training sessions before going out and taking action against the capitalist profiteers of death. She flatly refused this idea of feeling powerless as *“a bit of a myth, Our options are limited, but not as limited as we’ve been lead to believe.”* Before commenting on how she had found personal empowerment in action and the actions of Palestine Action noting it’s successes against companies like Elbit.

“We are anti-war, to be anti war is to oppose the killing of fellow human being. To stop weapons being made is surely a positive way to stop people being killed.”

Her section was stripped of the political rhetoric of The Great War and focused on the pragmatic response to colonial genocide in the here and now. She also made a point of talking about the nature of Palestine Actions make up and the direct involvement of working class anti-militarists. It was refreshing, inspiring and easily the most engaging talk that presented actual solutions and actions the listeners could go away and do to confront militarism and the violence of the capital/state. As she spoke the comments section lit up for the first time, and not with solidarity, but hostility.

“Candy is very much supporting the lesser evil idea which is a cheap con to getting people to support one capitalist side against the other. So let’s stop arms suppliers to Hamas too. You can’t be against war but still support one capitalist side and this is why national defencism is wrong”

At this point Alex was still unable to talk so we broke into discussion, given this was mostly opinions of random attendees I won’t stray too far into it. Other than these few points.

One speaker suggested that “anarchists have a problem concept, that of imperialism/colonialism” and that this suggested there was a better country and a lesser evil, something he rejected, citing specifically Kurdish Iraq. This attitude towards a “lesser evil” was repeated by several others.

One person was so offended by the “Lesser Evilism” in Candy’s section (and in a recent issue of Jackdaw) that they felt the need to tell the ACG how disappointed in them he was for them providing a platform for it.

In fact Candy was the subject of a fair amount of commentary as her value as an actionist, her capacity to gauge class, and the merits as an anarchist were all raked over the coals. All of which she took with infinite patience and steady repetition of the key points as if talking to perturbed children.

One speaker mentioned the need to confront the militarism in society, organise against Armed Forces day etc, even floating the idea of a picket of Help For Heroes. *“This is how we reach out to normal everyday working class people... to start a conversation with these people... who are strangers to me”. I’m not sure it is.*

Finally after near two hours we came to the closing remarks back with D with the ACG. He opened by stating that where we have disagreements we should be capable to listening. That there is a need to confront the “revolutionary nationalism” of would be libertarians, the *“People doing jumble sales and whist drives to buy drones and military equipment... we need to be better than them at supporting the internationalists”* (yeah I had to look it up whist drive too). He made a point about how today the arms industry supplies Israel, tomorrow it might supply Palestine, seemingly in a vague argument against “Palestine nationalism”, which is the more acceptable term for “Solidarity with the victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Palestine”.

In conclusion he remarked “We need to be engaging with the people who believe things we don’t believe are conducive to revolutionary change”, which is why I’ve put this report back together and why I’ll now give my feedback.

In all of this talk, the only person who actually spoke about taking part in active sabotage of the war machine, Candy, was treated with disdain and disinterest. No one bothered to explore her purpose, share ideas or ask for lessons on how they might engage in such sabotage (even if for their specific aim of defeatism) they simply informed her that she was wrong. Sometimes while at the same time acknowledging the genocide in Palestine.

Direct action and actual support for deserters only came up at the very end, a trailing after thought as something to discuss at some point in the future. There was some approval of anti-militarist action in solidarity with Palestine but it seemed that this was being appropriated by the “Revolutionary Defeatists”, as was historical trade union activity during war time. This struck me as pretty odd but given that at no point did any of them actually provide information on a single act of sabotage in the name of defeatism I understand why they leant on the actions of those who actually do things.

Aside from this there were some overt, persistent, and consistent mistakes across the board which are common with these Leninist “Revolutionary Defeatism” advocates. First, they are stuck on the false idea that a nation-state and it’s people are congruent. The conversation is transfixed with “imperialist powers” and not the humans involved. In this narrative the working class people at the heart of the matter have no agency but are mere vessels for the whims of the elite. If you are involved in a conflict you are fighting for “national boundaries” and not “survival against the occupier who means to kill me” or any other purpose you may have. The reasons people are fighting in these conflicts are a multitude, not simply “nationalism” and to reduce it so it deeply misleading and categorically reductive and inaccurate.

Secondly, the appeal to philosophy supported by the words of men who died a hundred years ago means very little to the dead. You wax philosophically about the “only” correct position to take while not once did I hear any consideration for the tens of thousands who lay dead in Palestine right now, other than from Candy. I simply do not understand you appeal for them to express working class proletarian internationalism with those celebrating the atrocities visited upon them. Yes, philosophically the working class should rise up against our would be rulers international, but there are some pretty critical and immediate issues to address first. That is, to end the violence of the aggressor. This is the pragmatic reality of the situation. People are dying. Supplying them with medical aid is not positioning yourself with a “side in an imperialist war”,

even if others who agree with the broad position extend this to military aid or do indeed support the state as the vehicle for organised defense. As anarchists I believe we should avoid reducing individuals to vague nebulous collectives we can align with and more to the point discount out of hand. Remember the human.

You call those who stand with solidarity with the occupied peoples “pro-war” and somehow you cannot see that the rhetoric and semantics of debate mean nothing to the victims of genocide. Our first and primary role as conscious anarchists is to fight for the people who are made victim by the systems of power, whether that’s the violence of capitalism or the state. Our mandate is to act, not to passively sit by waving a finger about how it “should be done”.

Tho it was only brought up in scoffing remarks, a couple of times it was eluded that the revolutionary defeatist programme for Palestinians would be to actively sabotage the resistance fighters and accept the Israeli occupation. *One is as bad for as the other, right?* Is this really your argument? No wonder you have to keep beating the drum that yours is a position increasingly held by fewer and fewer people. It’s absurd.

Honestly other than Candy, I was surprised at the level of Marxism and LeftCom talking points and positions there were. I believe in discussion across the aisle but I was expecting a little more Anarchism to be present, instead it was quotes by Lenin and John “Scottish Lenin” Maclean.

Speaking of who, I was mildly surprised that he was mentioned either by D or the three others who would later quote Maclean was his nuanced and complex positions on Irish liberation from beneath the yolk of colonial Britain. The most notable text (of which there are several) was the pamphlet *“The Irish Tragedy: Scotland’s Disgrace”* which sold some 20,000 copies, makes his view (at the time) quite clear *“If Ulstermen cannot tolerate an Irish Republic, let them take a taste of emigration”* and later *“Should Ireland get a Republic the class war will then burst out and be fought out till Irish Labour wins and establishes Communism...”* His somewhat nebulous Pan-Celtic politics seem like a curious one to be pulled up several times, especially those who would denounce “Palestinian nationalism” in commentary about the militant direct action of Palestine Action.

Ultimately I do actually agree with you D, that “We need to be engaging with the people who believe things we don’t believe are conducive to revolutionary change”. I believe the path to this is through spirited conversation in good faith. I believe we should avoid the petty name calling and bad faith interpretations. I have absolutely no interest in petty brinkmanship, pushing such disagreements to the point of no return, hoping the other will back down to save the drama, nor for the lacing of our language with atrocious and fatally offensive terms like “pro-war Anarchists” and “Nationalist so-called libertarians”. There seems to be a tone of self-aggrandisement, the Defeatists are the last few “real anarchists”, and from this chauvinist position they look down upon the rest with scorn. several times there were nudge nudge wink wink attacks on “other organisations” never daring to actually say what you mean, like they had been told beforehand to tone it down during recording. This normalisation of internecine animosity we’ve seen over the issue of war these past couple of years tires me and does not speak well to our mutual cooperation here on Britain or internationally in the future. This can in fairness also found amongst the opposite crowd, who would readily label some of the speakers “Anarcho-Putinist” and “genocide apologists” who are quite happy to sit in safety far away from all the pain and suffering. We must move beyond political point scoring. We are not politicians, we are revolutionary anarchists together in the class struggle and we should aim to act with mutual respect and solidarity.

The issue of National liberation in the face of genocide has been an issue since the dawn of Anarchism as a political theory and they will be arguing about it long into the future as some colony on Europa bids for Autonomy, and arguments rage over issues we cannot even conceive right now, just as much of the current struggles would of been a mystery to Voltaire, Bakunin, and Malatesta. Closer to now, after the war, now even, I hope for a better anarchism, one less self infatuated with history but more the living and breathing political currents we are in and with revolutionary purpose, cut through the chaff and take action for the liberation of all.

ACG, I want you to keep holding such talks, keep talking, but also **act**. Even tho I disagree with your lack of internationalist solidarity with the victims of colonialism and occupation, I would be more than delighted to see you take the lessons of Palestine Action and others and fight the war machine directly.

Please try to listen to those who go and fight the bastards next time.

The facilitator noted that the audio of the talk was recorded and will be made into a podcast. I can't really say it's worth your two hours but if you've got a bit of a drive or some fancy cooking to do, might be something to stick on.

My thanks to those who spoke, especially Candy.

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